

Trash Heap

by Michelle Lega

“It’s shit is what it is. S-H-I-T.”

Gerardo was ranting again in the van on the way to the drop-off point. He sat on one long bench of two in the back, wearing army fatigues and bullet-proof armor, surrounded by others similarly geared. An older woman at the wheel looked over her shoulder at him.

“Cut it out, G. Ain’t no one living here, ‘course it’s gone to shit.”

“I’m just saying, I don’t know why we come to these places. It’s mangy dogs and disgusting rats and disease-infested garbage,” he said, his voice getting louder.

A younger woman scoffed audibly. He shot her a glare and opened his mouth but was prevented from saying anything when the van screeched to a halt, throwing him to the side. The driver killed the ignition and turned around again.

“Right, kids, we’re here. Don’t have too much fun now! Radio when you’re on your way back.” Gerardo grumbled. He hated this part. For a year now, his special ops unit had been cleaning up the war-torn and abandoned neighborhoods in the largest cities in Venezuela after the Democratic Army came in and squashed whatever homegrown resistance militia was gaining traction. The unit’s goal was simple: find stragglers and bring them to a DA base nearby where they would be given lodging and food until the bombed and burnt-out parts of the city could be rebuilt.

Gerardo climbed out of the van and landed heavily on his feet. He offered a mocking hand to the woman who had laughed at him which she deliberately ignored and deftly jumped down.

“Pretty sure garbage can’t be disease-ridden,” she said, smiling politely into his face and walking around the side of the van to join the rest of the team.

“Elly, you-“ he sputtered. He hit the side of his van with his still-proffered hand before joining the others.

Elly knelt on the ground, her large rucksack open in front of her. She rifled through its contents, checking packs of bandages, pill bottles, vials, and other medical paraphernalia. She was the youngest one in the group, no older than twenty-five, with a shaved head and a stern gaze that belied her soothing hand and calming voice. The child of doctors, she had grown up helping her parents treat everything from minor colds to large lacerations. Her devotion to medical care manifested when she signed up as a medic with the DA instead of enrolling in college. Despite her parents’ adamant warnings, she traveled to Venezuela to assist in the attempt to replace the fascist government that had long been committing human rights atrocities against its citizens.

After a mostly successful campaign, the DA had succeeded in installing a new democratic government, and Elly was placed with a special ops team designed to secure the more turbulent areas of Caracas. She hadn’t seen a lot of action, but she was happy to help where she could. Her trips back to base consisted of her treating the remaining insurgents and civilians who had lost their homes.

After all her supplies had been accounted for, Elly stood up, shouldered her pack, and nodded at Commander Franks. He was a veteran of multiple wars, and in his

semi-retirement begged to be placed with a unit doing something in the field to avoid being on office duty for the rest of his career.

“Alright gang, you know the drill. Spread out, take a friend, holler if you see anyone or anything suspicious,” he barked. “Elly, you’re with me. We’ll be stationed at the fountain in the square down that way.” He pointed down a road to an opening where the team could just make out a bone-dry stone fountain, crumbled half to the ground.

The team nodded and set out. Elly followed Franks down the road, eyes peeled, though she knew it was unlikely they’d find anyone there. Their last three missions had all been unfruitful. Either the people knew who they were and had found ways to avoid them or they had succeeded in rounding up nearly all of the unaccounted-for civilians in the city.

Elly smiled as she trotted alongside her commander. At times, she had questioned how much they were able to help in this conflict but seeing areas like the neighborhood they were in now, she knew they were doing the right thing. The buildings there were decrepit and not just from the war. Rusty sinks, overflowing dumpsters, even a few rotting dog corpses littered the alleys. The cobblestone street was nearly undrivable and most of the storefronts looked like they hadn’t been occupied in years, certainly since before the war started. *We’re giving these people a chance at a better life*, she thought.

#

Paola’s eyes snapped open as she threw her arm out to her side, wincing as it thudded against a stone wall. She groaned and brought her arm back to her chest, clenching and unclenching her tender fist. She sat up and surveyed her surroundings.

Tucked into the corner of an abandoned church, the light streamed through stained glass windows and fell on her ragged backpack and pile of blankets. A rat was scampering away from her pack, startled from its attempted meal by her fist hitting the wall.

“Oh you little shit!” she hissed, scrambling towards her bag to check the damage. She turned it over gently in her hands before noticing a small hole, freshly chewed. She sighed and stood up, setting the bag on the altar to keep it out of reach. Deftly, she threaded her thick dark hair into a tight braid, tying it with a piece of thread and throwing it over her shoulder. Her loose t-shirt hung over a thin but well-muscled frame.

Paola stepped outside into the courtyard, the morning sun streaming over broken statues and a weed-infested cobblestone ground. A small stone pot stood in the corner, filled halfway with murky water, leaves, and mosquitos. She made her way over to the pot and swiped away the bugs, using her hands to scoop up a handful and splash it on her face. She then leaned against the wall with one foot, stretching her calf muscles and grimacing.

Back inside the church, she buckled her pack securely on her back and walked to the front entrance. She pulled the heavy wood post from its place between the door handles and stepped outside. Aside from a flock of pigeons and a few rats, there were no signs of life. Taking a deep breath, Paola leapt out the doorway and took off running.

Keeping to the shadows, she followed a well-trod path past the long-empty corner store, through the alley between two apartment buildings, under the viaduct, and through a park now overgrown with bushes and tall weeds. Her pace and her breath were even as she stretched her legs and touched her feet so lightly to the ground she

didn't even startle nearby birds. With the practice of a runner and the determination of someone in a constant battle between life and death, she made it across the city into a slightly less decrepit neighborhood.

She slowed down as she snuck past the main street and tucked herself into an alley. Pulling a map out of her backpack, she traced her path with her finger past X-ed out circles and stopped at an open circle with the scribbled name "TRASH HEAP." She hadn't been here before, but her other food supply sources had run dry, and she'd heard it hadn't been as ransacked as most of the other neighborhoods in the area.

Looking around her, she could see why. The few remaining locals may call it Trash Heap, but the neighborhood was much nicer than the one she had made her home base. Single family homes and sturdy two-flats made up most of the residential area, and the hollowed-out businesses looked like they once held boutiques and specialty shops instead of the one-stop convenience stores she was used to.

This place was dangerous for her. Enough people knew about it that she would have competition, and word of it had certainly gotten back to the army. They hadn't raided Trash Heap yet, and it was only a matter of time before they targeted the area, snatching up the starving street kids and remaining resistance members just trying to find something edible. Paola's stomach growled almost imperceptibly. She had spent enough time hiding and starving that she could control most of its natural complaints, but it had been two days since her last solid meal, and she could feel herself weakening.

She turned away from the main street and continued down the alley, quietly checking every trash bin and cardboard box she passed by. No luck. Whoever had been here before had done a thorough job of clearing out anything usable.

Her path through the alleys took her to the back door of what used to be one of the nicest restaurants in town. The lock was broken off the door, but Paola quietly opened it and slipped inside anyway. It was an unspoken rule among the street kids to only take what you needed, both out of respect for the others who might need it and out of fear that stockpiling would get you discovered by the army or killed.

The kitchen looked like most other restaurant kitchens she had seen since she had started living on the street: stainless steel pots and pans, rat droppings littering the floors, rotten rubber mats in front of long-unusable gas stoves. She ignored all of this and made her way to the freezer in a crouch.

The freezer door was slightly open, not a good sign. It was either empty or whatever was in there had gone bad. Paola pulled it open regardless. It wasn't any cooler inside than it was in the humid spring heat outside, and the lack of an odor indicated to her that it had been cleared out a while ago. She took a step inside and whirled around, scanning the shelves quickly to see if anything had been missed.

Crouching to ground level, she gasped as she saw a can tucked in the back of the lowest shelf. She snatched it and held it up to inspect. It was a can of peeled tomatoes, dented and dusty but still intact. She tucked it into her pack, ignoring another bout of her stomach growling, and made her way to the dining room. Sometimes there would be baskets of crackers or mints that would go ignored by people looking for more substantial food or forgetting to check the dining area.

Once past the swinging doors, she paused to look around. The restaurant had once been grand, that was evident. The dusty walls were covered in a red velvet material, and the wall booths were separated by thick curtains. Paola made a mental note to come back when the weather was colder and grab one of those curtains for bedding. The cash register had been yanked open and it looked as if someone had tried to remove it from where it had been screwed into the counter. She crept over to check it, but there was nothing inside but a few paperclips.

She turned to head back through the kitchen when her eyes caught on a large aquarium, prominently displayed in the front window. It was still half-full of water. She picked up one of the paper clips and tossed it at the tank, hearing a *clink* as it hit the glass. The water rippled as a slow-moving lobster lifted a claw. Dropping to the ground, Paola sped over to the tank.

After a quick glance out the windows, she stood up over the tank and peered in. There was one moving lobster in there and one that appeared to be dead. She didn't want to risk eating a potentially already decomposed creature, but the lobster that was waving both its claws seemed weak enough for her to grab without injury. Taking one last glance up, she thrust her hand into the water and grabbed at the lobster.

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"Do you think this was a nice place to live?" Commander Franks asked as he and Elly stood at ease by the dry fountain.

Elly looked around. Her kneejerk reaction was an immediate *no, no way*, based on the sad state of the plumbing and the tiny apartments packed close together. On second look, though, she started noticing parts of the neighborhood that indicated this

was one a nice place to live. The fountain was an obvious first sign, but looking past that, she saw a bed and breakfast that looked comfortable and modern, a collection of coffeeshops and cafes that still had some plush cushions and higher-end appliances, and a few restaurants with brocade curtains and once-white tablecloths.

“I think it might have been, sir,” she said, turning to him. He looked down at her and nodded.

“I agree. I imagine this place must have been a wonderful place to sit on a warm Sunday afternoon.” He walked over to the fountain and dusted off a section of the still-intact stone before sitting down. Elly joined him.

“I hope we find someone here,” he said. “People on top aren’t so nice when we come back empty-handed.”

“Empty-handed? But sir, isn’t it a good sign if we don’t find anyone? Doesn’t that mean we’re getting closer to locking down the whole capital?”

Franks chuckled. “Oh no, that just means the street rats are getting better at hiding. We gotta make sure we don’t leave anyone to start up a rebellion against us. Least that’s what the General says.”

Elly looked down. She knew he was right from a tactical standpoint. No one wanted to deprive these people of their homes, but she knew the casualties would be much greater if another insurgence was allowed to cultivate.

The commander seemed to be expecting a response. She looked back up at him. “We’ve gotta protect our own, right?” she said.

He grunted an assent and stood up. “C’mon, let’s check out some of the buildings nearby,” he said. Elly stood up with him, and they walked together to a nearby

coffeeshop. The hand-painted menu was peeling but still readable. Elly felt her throat tighten as she thought of the people who worked here, who owned this shop, and their customers who came here every day to order a *café*, or who brought their kids here on a special occasion to get a *chocolate caliente*.

It could have been me, she thought. *This could have been my town, or I could have been living here had circumstances been different.* The thought gave her goosebumps.

The crackling of the commander's radio startled her and she dropped a mug she had been absentmindedly turning over in her hands. Franks looked pointedly at her as he answered.

"Report," he said.

Through crackles, Elly heard a voice. "...found a girl... restaurant... Gerardo hit her but she didn't go down... trying to find her now..."

"Send your coordinates, we'll fan out and find her," Franks said into the radio.

"Got a description?"

"...long braid, skinny, young-looking..."

"Got it. Over and out." He looked at Elly. She nodded and shifted her gear more securely on her back. She knew that now the team would spread out near where the girl was seen, searching in every hidey-hole to find her. Elly was often back up on these search missions, as the runners were usually in need of medical care. *Especially if she was hit with a dart*, she thought before jogging into the street with her commander.

#

Paola's hand closed around the lobster's body on her first try. She pulled it out of the water and held tight, though the lobster was so weak it barely put up a fight. Its claws were rubber-banded and it was gently waving them in the air.

"Got you, little bastard," Paola whispered to it. She bent down and pulled a shirt out of her pack to wrap around the lobster. After she shoved it into her pack, making sure it couldn't move, she stood up and turned around, ready to run through the kitchen again.

At that moment, she heard a *swish-thack* and felt a sharp pain on her upper arm. She dropped to the ground and peered through the murky tank water out the window. She saw movement across the street coming towards her. Looking down at her arm, she saw a small dart stuck in it. A wave of dizziness washed over her.

"Oh, not *now!*" she snarled and yanked the dart out of her arm. Stumbling, she made her way to the back kitchen door, feeling like she had just taken a strong dose of a sleeping medication. Once to the kitchen, she ran, trying hard to stay upright as her vision faded in and out. She made it to the door and threw caution to the wind, switching into a full-out sprint with her arms held in front of her to protect her from whatever she might run into.

Loud shouts came from one street over, where she saw movement. The voices spoke English. *Damn invaders!* she thought as she ran, trying to ignore her weakening muscles and closing eyes.

"Gotta... keep... going!" she said, both to motivate herself and to try to keep her brain awake. She felt herself flagging and she knew at any moment she would fall onto the ground, unable to move. The army used some sort of paralyzing agent to take down

anyone left in the burnt-out cities. She'd seen it happen more than once, and it wasn't a pretty sight. *I won't... let them... get me!*

Suddenly, the ground fell out from under her and she pitched forward. She couldn't see where she was but she felt her body slam against concrete steps as she fell down a stairwell. Her muscles were too weak to even try to grab on to anything, so she let herself go limp as she tumbled down and landed on her side on cool concrete. Her eyes closed and she drifted off, unable to stay awake any longer.

#

Elly followed Franks past the coffee shop and through an alleyway, watching rats scatter at the sound of their footsteps. She kept up a light jog as he led her onto another cobblestone street, lined with a collection of boutiques and restaurants.

"Can't've gone far," Gerardo called out when he spotted them. He stood in front of what was once a nice seafood restaurant, the lobster tank in the window nearly empty except for one dead lobster. "She was grabbing one of these guys when I hit her. Ran out the back."

Franks nodded and stepped through the door. "There's an alley back here. Gerardo, you go left. Elly can take the right exit. I'll check out the other buildings nearby to see if she ducked in one of them."

Elly followed Franks through the restaurant and out the back door. The alley was piled with trash and debris but picked clean of anything edible. *I can't imagine they're having an easy time finding food now*, she thought.

She looked off to the left where Gerardo was jogging and kicking every bundle of trash he saw, human-sized or not. Franks gestured down the other direction and she

took off at a slow jog, opening her ears and scanning the stone walls for any spots the girl could've slipped into. She ignored the doors that lined the alleyway. Franks would take care of searching the adjacent buildings.

Enough time at this job had trained Elly's eyes to spot anything that looked out of place in a mostly abandoned city. Newly torn scraps of fabric, a handprint in the dust, kicked up pieces of cobblestone. The people they tracked were very good at hiding themselves, but she knew it was impossible to erase all traces of existence.

She stopped her jog suddenly as her eyes landed on a can of food that had rolled off to the side of an opening in the alley wall. She bent down to look at it, noticing the lack of dust. It was a can of tomatoes, still sealed, something no runner would ever leave behind. She stuffed it in her bag and peered through the opening. It led to a flight of stone steps, shadowed from the sun by the neighboring buildings.

Elly unclipped her flashlight from her belt and clicked it on. She shined it down the dark stairway and took a few steps. Protocol called for her to radio in if she found anything, but the last thing she wanted was Gerardo to come storming over and scaring away the runner.

As she made her way down the staircase, she noticed bits of the walls that had crumbled off from some sort of impact. The dust had been disturbed recently, though she couldn't make out clear footsteps. A few more steps down and she heard a slight groan from the bottom of the stairs. Throwing caution to the wind, she jogged the rest of the way down. *Sounds like someone's hurt*, she thought.

After turning a corner at the end of the staircase, she saw a person lying in a pile. Her limbs were contorted at angles Elly knew would take a while to heal, and a trickle of

blood trailed down her forehead. Elly shined her flashlight into the girl's face and saw her pupils contract.

"Don't..." the girl said weakly. The muscles around her shoulder tensed and Elly could tell she was trying to move her arm. She angled the light away and put out a hand.

"You shouldn't try to move," she said. "It'll only make it worse."

"Don't tell me... what to do," the girl said. Hatred burned in her weak voice.

Elly's radio fuzzed to life.

"...report in..." came Franks' voice.

"Nothing..." said Gerardo.

Elly unhooked it from her belt and brought it to her mouth.

"No!" the girl said with a viciousness that surprised Elly.

"Don't worry," Elly said. "We'll get you to a better place. With a warm bed, and good food and your people."

"You mean... a prison," she said. Her back muscle strained again, trying to push herself upright. "God damn... paralyzing..."

Elly stayed her with a gentle hand on her back. "You likely have multiple broken bones. You have to stay still, or you'll risk hurting yourself more."

"And whose fault is that?"

"I-" Elly faltered. "You shouldn't've run. You knew what could happen."

"Running is better than being imprisoned and indoctrinated in your shithole camps," the girl spat. "Would rather be dead than there."

The radio crackled again.

“Elly, status report?” Franks voice said.

“Leave me alone,” the girl said. Her voice was weaker and Elly could tell she was holding back a lot of pain. “Just... just tell them you didn’t find me.”

“I can’t just leave you her in this state,” Elly said.

“I wish you would,” the girl muttered. Her face clenched and she let out a low groan. “I’ve gotten out of... worse... messes.”

“Elly?” the staticky voice came from her radio.

Elly looked down at the girl, nearly out of consciousness. She lifted her radio to her mouth and saw the girl’s eyes flicker open with one last plea before drifting shut. Her breath was shallow and the trickle of blood on her head had started to spread. Elly pulled a rag from her pack and wiped it up, then clicked her radio on.

“...Still looking...” she said. “Haven’t found anything yet...” She kept her finger on the radio button for a few seconds before releasing it.

“Give it another five, then meet up at the fountain,” Franks crackling voice said. “We can regroup there.”

Elly stared at the girl, at her lean muscle and ragged pack, and held the radio to her lips. “...Roger,” she said, and shut it off. She grabbed the pack and stood into a squat, adjusting her bags before carefully placing her arms under the girl.

#

The first sensation was pain. Everywhere, pain throbbed through Paola’s body and wracked her head. Her lungs hurt when she inhaled, and as she took stock of her limbs, she discovered she couldn’t move one of her legs at all. *Definitely broken.* Her

mouth was sticky dry and tasted like dust. Opening her eyes, she let out an inadvertent groan as the stinging sun sent shockwaves of pain through her skull.

A worried face swam into her vision. A worried white face, small nose and blue eyes somehow still soft. The last time someone had looked at Paola like that, it was her mother putting her to bed hours before their apartment was bombed out. Whether it was the rebels or the invaders, Paola never knew. She was eight at the time.

“Are you okay?” the woman said. *Elly*, Paola remembered hearing someone call her over the radio. *So I lost. I'm in one of their dumb shit camps.*

“Obviously not,” she replied. She suspected what would happen next. This woman would treat her wounds, convince her she was safe now. Then she'd be thrown into a pen with the rest of the people they'd captured – some of them her friends – and forced to beg for her own humanity on her native land from these people who couldn't bear the thought of letting a conflict go unbothered.

A weak laugh. This woman was not much older than her. *An army brat, maybe. Or a really dedicated patriot.* Her lip curled at the thought. Paola herself had never had much love for her own country that had been in turmoil since before she was born, but she was grateful for its independence, its fierce spirit. It was a country that had fought off the amassing powers of the strongest militaries in the world, but under the constant threat of nuclear warfare and after the dissolution of Brazil, the so-called Democratic Army had invaded under the guise of saving her people from their oppressive government. *Never mind the human rights atrocities the DA commits on a daily basis. At least my government never shot me with a paralyzing dart.*

“Your leg is broken so, um, I’m going to try to splint it,” the woman’s voice said.
“It’ll hurt.”

“I’ve been through worse,” Paola said. Broken bones, bruised ribs, concussions – injury was the necessary truth of living in the shadows of the ruined capital.

“You may want to bite down on this.” A calloused hand brought a dusty backpack strap into view.

Paola scoffed. “Of course you don’t offer anesthetics to your prisoners. Can’t waste your precious supply.” She grabbed the strap, ignoring the ache in her shoulder muscles as she lifted her arm, and bit into it.

A shadow passed over the woman’s face. “You’re not my...” she stopped herself. *Good*, Paola thought. *At least she won’t even try to lie.*

Paola closed her eyes. She was tired of watching this person grapple with her misplaced guilt. “Just get on with it,” she mumbled through the backpack strap.

She could barely feel the gentle hands on her bare leg, but she nearly shrieked when felt the pressure of those hands straighten her leg and heard the crunch of bone grinding against bone. The woman moved quickly; Paola would give her that. A few minutes of agony and Paola looked down to see her leg stabilized in a splint. She couldn’t move it even if she wanted to. She spat out the backpack strap.

“Now what? You leave me here to die, maybe come back every few days to give me a cup of water?” Paola said. She let the poison coat her words. This woman deserved every bit of guilt Paola could make her feel, and more.

The radio crackled to life. It was the same man’s voice as before, authoritative. “Listen Elly, I know you’ve been through a lot. We all have. But you took an oath to

protect your own and serve the betterment of your people. Of all people. You can't just—" The radio clicked off.

Paola shifted her weight to her arms and slowly adjusted herself upright. To her surprise, instead of seeing army tents and chain link fences, she saw the walls of her church. She was laid up on the altar with the woman crouched nearby, her grim face looking down at the radio she held in her hand.

"What the hell?" Paola said. "Why are we *here*? Where are your shitty tents and crap food and prison guards?"

Elly didn't meet her eyes. "I couldn't leave you." The concern in her voice was almost touching. Paola blanched.

"So you put the biggest target on my back by coming with me?" Paola's anger was fiery in her chest. This woman might as well have drawn a giant arrow on a map right at the church, Paola's home for the past three years. *Stupid, stupid misplaced guilt!*

The radio crackled again. Elly immediately shut it off. Paola's eyes flicked to the device, wishing her gaze could burn. "And *that*," she said. Elly gripped the radio, still not looking at her. "You idiot! Don't you know they put tracking devices in those? In all your dumb shit? It's only a matter of time before they bomb this place to pieces." Paola pushed herself off the ground and set her weight on her good leg. She had to get out of there. She wasn't going to die because of some army idiot's mistake.

The woman put her hand out, a softening gesture. "I know, I know. Don't try to get up. Please, you have to heal." Her voice was pleading, worrying. "I got rid of the tracker, trust me. All of them, in fact." She turned her arm to reveal a newly stitched wound in her upper bicep.

“They put them *in* you? And you let them?” Paola said. *These people are sheep. They’re all sheep and I’m foolish to try to reason with one.*

“I had to. No other choice.”

Paola looked around at the sun speckling through the broken stained glass windows, the crumbling altar, the scattered pews. Her splinted and useless leg, a death sentence if not for this woman who was probably lying to her. She laughed bitterly.

“Clearly you did have a choice.”

#

It wasn’t easy for Elly, caring for this girl who had more life in her than her body knew what to do with. Shortly after they moved into the church, the girl – *Paola*, Elly thought – caught a fever that left her sleep restless and her body wracked with chills. It was an infection from one of the many injuries Paola had sustained, Elly knew this. She used what precious little medication she had in her field bag to ease the fever and keep her sedated, but each morning was a breathless rush to the makeshift bed Paola lay in to see the rise and fall of her chest, feel her pulse powering through her veins.

Elly had learned from Paola when she was conscious the best places to track down food. For all that the girl had scoffed at the army’s food, Elly found the meager living off poorly cooked rat meat and years-expired canned maize hard to stomach. She missed the warm soup and sloppy joes they served at the mess. She missed nights drinking beers until she didn’t have to think about the people that were dying all around her. But most of all she missed the camaraderie.

Paola showed little sign of trusting Elly to do more than provide food and medical support to her, and she certainly wasn’t sharing stories over the campfire. She kept

mostly silent and Elly respected her silence, but she missed chatting and laughing with her unit.

“Guess there’s not much reason to laugh around here,” she muttered to herself one night while waiting for the mushy hominy in their dirty pot to heat up over a small fire.

An amused snort came from where Paola lay on her bed. “That a surprise to you?” she said, venom in her voice. Elly grimaced. She hadn’t known the girl was awake. Paola had told her in enough words that she wasn’t about to get friendly with her just because she had saved the girl. *Useless guilt*, she called it, whatever Elly was doing. That phrase weighed heavy on her mind.

One of the days past the fever, when Paola had gained enough strength back to sit up and show Elly how to make a proper “trash stew” as she called it, the girl looked at Elly over the fire, her dark brown eyes showing flat annoyance. “Your hair’s growing in,” she said. “Not a lot of razors around here to keep it shaved.”

Elly laughed too desperately. She ran a hand over the thickening stubble on the back of her head. “You’ll have to teach me how to braid it when it gets long enough.”

Paola’s lip curled as she stirred the stew. “How long do you plan on staying here, *gringa*? This place isn’t for you.”

Elly took a breath. “I figured I could help. You know, all of you. I’m sure you don’t have doctors around here to look after you.” She laughed shortly but stopped too soon. There could very well be medical professionals hiding out around the capital. She’d caught herself making these assumptions too often in the past weeks, usually eliciting a glare from Paola. This time she didn’t even need the glare to know.

“You want to set up a cute little commune to round up all the damaged brown people around here and take care of them, huh? Your little white savior ideal giving you grand designs?” Paola tasted a bit of the stew from the pot. Despite her words, she appeared unbothered.

“No I... I guess I don’t have anywhere else to go,” Elly said.

Those impenetrable eyes met hers again. “Then you’re no better than the rest of us.”

Elly refused to pull her eyes away from the stare down, trying to convince the girl of her earnestness through her gaze. A spoon was brought up to her mouth. “Try this,” Paola said. Elly took a sip and her mouth was filled with flavor and heat and a feeling she had been missing something important in the weeks she had been in charge of cooking.

“How did you get it to taste like that?” she asked.

Paola pulled out a pouch from her knapsack and held it out to Elly. It was full of pungent spices, the aroma making Elly’s mouth water. “A little goes a long way,” she said. “They lasted on the shelves of the grocery stores longer than most anything else. You think I’d survive this long on the unseasoned rat you’ve been feeding us?”

Elly readily accepted the next spoonful Paola offered. She savored the taste, ignoring the shame of her ignorance as it flushed her face red. “Teach me,” she said to the girl.

#

Elly was annoyingly persistent in her desire to help. There was the fussing over Paola’s broken leg, the constant pushing her to drink more water, the rushing to her

side when she couldn't restrain her fever chills. Paola cautiously appreciated the aid she offered, well aware she'd likely be dead without it, but waited every day for the time Elly decided to go back to her army pals and turn them both in. Elly's motherly instincts made it seem unlikely that she would leave Paola if she did decide to return to the army camp, a thought that made her shudder.

"How old are you?" Paola asked Elly while they were lounging around the church. The midafternoon sun laid out a multicolored pattern on the concrete ground from the stained glass, and Elly was sitting in a pew watching the light reflect shimmering patterns on her arm as she moved it through the shadows.

"Twenty-three," she answered.

Paola smirked. "Of course," she said. *Not much older than me*, she thought.

"What?" Elly said absentmindedly, still watching the trails of sun drag along her skin.

"Makes sense, is all," Paola said. "No wonder you're so naïve."

"I don't think I'm naïve. I don't think anyone in the DA is."

This made Paola laugh out loud. "Sorry, your grand gestures of beating down supposedly fascist governments in other lands so you can ignore what's going on in your own countries is not naïve? Please."

"We want a better world. Is that really worth scoffing at?" She had stopped looking at the lights and had turned her puppy dog eyes onto Paola. She hated that look. It was a look that could get this woman anything she wanted, a feigned weakness that probably worked on her chivalrous commander but wouldn't ever work on her.

“My family died because of your better world.” Saying those words didn’t hurt Paola like they used to, but she couldn’t keep the bitterness out of her voice altogether. She looked away before she could see the pain in Elly’s face. She wasn’t used to sympathy.

“I’m... sorry,” Elly said. Her voice, surprisingly, was neutral. “But I want to stop that from happening to other people like you. If you work with me, we could turn this place around. We could, I don’t know, start a community. Talk to the DA. Talk to the rebels. Rebuild the city.”

It was a pretty dream. Paola imagined the corner stores bustling, the cafes thronged with people, the festivals returned to a city made whole. *But whose city would it be?* She tried to imagine Elly dancing in a Carnival parade. A memory that she barely held onto, the bright colors and loud music of the only Carnival she had attended when she was six years old. Before it had become too dangerous to be outside in large crowds, and before the DA had bombed out the city.

“Sounds nice,” she said. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Having Elly around wasn’t the worst thing Paola could imagine. It was hard finding enough food to feed them both, and Paola found herself needing to go on food runs more often because Elly refused to let her skip meals. But to her credit, her leg was healing quickly and it was of a certain comfort to have the woman around. Elly kept guard while she slept and had even started rebuilding parts of the church that were the most damaged. “For better protection,” she explained, but Paola knew. She was trying to make them a home.

Against Elly's strongest certainties, the DA never came knocking at the heavy wooden door of the church. After that first day, she'd found a fresh corpse on a food run, an unfortunate soul, to ditch her radio and empty medical bag with along with her dog tags. She hadn't known how long it would keep them off her trail, but she hadn't seen any sign of them returning in the months that followed.

Paola's leg healed mostly straight and she had taken to jogging up and down the length of the church to get her strength back. Elly had patched the largest holes in the walls with the concrete paste she had made up from the ground-up foundation and grimy mud that pooled in the cisterns in the courtyard.

Despite Paola's hesitance, she had started trying to track down others who lived around them. She'd asked Paola first for locations of common hideouts but in response to her silence, had gone searching for them herself. She'd even found a few promising shelters in the back rooms or basements of buildings, but every time she got there to explore, the rooms were deserted, beds or fires still warm and freshly cooked food still laid out. *These people won't trust me unless I show them I can be trusted.*

Rainy season was in full swing at this point and it was all Paola and Elly could do to keep the leaky roof at bay. One day when Paola was steadying Elly as she stood on an upended pew, trying to hold a glob of her concrete paste against a hole in the ceiling long enough for it to solidify, she looked down at Paola. "You have to talk to them for me," she said.

"Who, the clouds? I doubt they'll listen." Paola laughed at her own joke. Her lightheartedness had come as a surprise as she warmed up to Elly.

“The other people who live here,” Elly pressed. “If we want to start a community, if we want to help, they have to be able to trust us. They wouldn’t listen to me even if I tried.”

“We don’t want to do anything. You start bringing all those people in there, it’ll be days before your army friends find out and bomb us all to hell.”

“I don’t think they would,” Elly said. She hadn’t known the DA to bomb anything, and it was drilled into them from the start that they’re trying to save people, not kill them. “Besides, it’s a church, and even monsters respect churches, huh?”

She smiled at Paola’s groan. It was a saying the girl had said often enough to explain why she stayed in the church and why they had never been bothered there.

“I’m being serious. We have to do something,” Elly said. She pulled her hands carefully away from the patched hole and let out a little cheer when it held. She accepted Paola’s offered hand as she hopped down from the pew.

“I am also being serious,” Paola said, still holding her hand. “We’re only safe as long as we don’t draw attention to ourselves. Setting up your own happy little community center is a threat to all of us.”

Elly sighed and dropped her hand. “I wish you could see it the way I do,” she said.

Paola tightened her lips. “And I wish you could see it like me.”

To her credit, Elly did start finding people. They wouldn’t talk to her at first, but she ran to their common supply areas often enough that they realized she was living the same life they were. Seeing her with Paola once or twice was enough to convince some of them to strike up conversation. Sometimes Elly brought one of them back to have

Paola translate, though even the children knew enough English for a broken conversation.

Soon Elly and Paola had regular visitors to the church. Elly busied herself with mending wounds and treating illnesses while Paola, for the most part, stayed out of the way. She would teach the younger ones how to cook, or discuss the best underground routes with the adults. But Elly saw the way her jaw clenched every time someone new came by. She was determined to prove to the girl that a community could be rebuilt in her hometown.

It came quick, the end. The rain had sagged the rafters and swelled the air, leaving Elly exhausted by the end of the day. She'd enjoyed a cheerful meal of boiled corn and fire-fried bread with Paola, quietly content in the new world she found herself in. Sleep hit her easily and soundly.

It wasn't the yelling that woke her up, but instead a whisper of movement, the fall of hair on her face for one brief moment. Her eyes fluttered open to a torrent a noise. Yelling, in English, and the thumping on the church door. She jumped upright, instinctively catching the scrap of folded paper that fell off her chest. She opened it and stared down at the words as the door cracked under the battering assault.

We can never build a community as long as the army is here.

Be safe.

Elly crumpled the paper in her hand. She hadn't even known that Paola could write, let alone in English. Her eyes flicked to the back of the church where Paola kept her bed. Nothing was there. Her knapsack was gone, the blankets scattered. The tense

slumbering figure that Elly had grown so used to seeing each night on watch had disappeared. Like she never existed.

Elly barely registered the surprise in Commander Franks' face when he found her standing there, stoic and not putting up a fight. She didn't flinch at the prick of the needle in her neck and she ignored Gerardo's sneering face as her body fell to the ground. It didn't matter what questions they asked. Her answers would never be enough. She would never be able to save these people's lives.

Commander Franks carried her to the truck, the tendons in his neck taut. He didn't look down at her, not even when he placed her in the back and climbed in to sit next to her. The rain muffled the rumble of the truck as it started up. Elly strained her eyes to peer into the darkness, looking for a flash of a braid, a ripped sleeve, those dark eyes. Instead she saw nothing.